Life & Times
Who was Dr Fairfield?

A story lost among the archives

Dr Letitia Fairfield (1885–1978) was a doctor, lawyer, feminist, a medic in the First World War, and the first ever female Chief Medical Officer for London. She worked against the face of male adversity at a time when women doctors were few, and fought contemporary stereotypes to champion causes and a career that she felt passionate about. However, her story has been somewhat lost in history. It was, perhaps, overshadowed by the scandal of her sister, Rebecca West, who had an illegitimate child with HG Wells, thereby attracting contemporary tabloid interest that proved a more compelling read than her sister's public health campaigns. She may also represent one of the many pioneering female doctors whose achievements have never been told and celebrated as fervently as those of their male counterparts.

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Lettie, as she was known by friends and family, was the eldest of three daughters of the Anglo-Irishman Charles Fairfield (1842–1906) and his Scottish wife, Isabella Campbell-Mackenzie (1853–1921). After years of struggling under the emotional and financial pressures of Charles's open affairs, gambling addiction, and the sudden revelation of a secret family in the US, Letitia's mother moved with her children to live with relatives. At Edinburgh Medical School for Women, Letitia's admission was made possible only by her receipt of one of the first ever Carnegie Scholarships and the generous gift of £100 from her Aunt Sophie, given to her in return for her promise of non-disclosure of Sophie's secret morphine habit.

During medical school, Letitia fondly described meeting wonderful teachers with great minds, but noted that *'the women were kept under as near an approach to the purdah system as a mixed school permits. We were forbidden university lectures.'*[1,2]

She recounted how she and her female colleagues were barred from several anatomy classes, for fear of embarrassing the male students. Despite receiving the highest marks of her year and being granted several awards, at the end of her medical education she was recommended only for asylum positions — the least respected of all medical posts.

Dr Letitia Fairfield in army uniform, 1917. Photograph by Royal Hardie (Salisbury). Image: Wellcome Library.

'My aunt said it was a silly idea for a woman to try to be a doctor, and Lettie should get a more ladylike job. If you worked in a shop, you kept your clothes on, see …' (Interview with Alison Selford, Letitia Fairfield's niece, at the Mary Fielding Guild Residential Home, London, 27 February 2013).

This gender bias did not appear to leave Lettie feeling resentful, however. So great was her love for medicine that she noted she felt no real anger towards any of the men or women who disapproved of her career choice, since in spite of their intentions she had succeeded in devoting her life to a career she felt passionately about. Despite a difficult journey, Letitia managed to climb the career ladder and pull other women up with her.

Letitia became a pioneer in the provision of health care for women, children, and the most vulnerable members of Britain's society — in particular her work focused upon the health concerns of prostitutes, homosexuals, and the poor. In 1923, she was called to the bar, after training in law to ensure that she had the right legal basis to tackle MPs about national public health issues.

When, following the 1929 Local Government Act, the London County Council took responsibility over London's Poor Law Board hospitals, Letitia oversaw the specialisation of obstetric and maternal medicine, and the use of local anaesthesia in labour. Having recognised the lack of proficient social services and preventive medicine, she instigated the first venereal disease treatment centres in Britain — the first example of a state-funded, nationwide healthcare service — and demanded that every homeless woman with venereal disease was visited by a social worker to help them seek employment, and given help in finding temporary accommodation.

It is not widely recognised that the novel focus upon these primarily female healthcare realms coincided with the first ever woman taking charge of the London County Council.

Dr Letitia Fairfield was a female doctor, whose relentless ambition for change ensured immense improvement in the health care of previously ignored and under-represented members of society; a woman who remained focused on what she believed was right, ignoring the social barriers obstructing her. Until the very end, she remained eccentric and inspiring, having spent her final days wearing a 'highly improbable blonde wig'[2] in an NHS hospital bed, hopefully comforted by the knowledge that she had done something truly extraordinary.

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